



## Mc Dougall's Good Stories for Children



### What Happened to a Very Bad Little Boy When the Wonderful Telltale Bug Came to His House



PERHAPS had a Telltale Bug been in Oliver Mason's house there would have been no story about him and the awful Redhaired Hazarack. Few children, as far as I know, have ever seen a Telltale Bug, and none at all have ever set eyes upon a Hazarack. The bug, as every parent is well aware, rarely allows children to notice him about a house for the reason that if bad boys or girls knew he was there they would behave themselves.

The Telltale Bug, as his name shows, reports to parents all that he sees, whether good or bad, and is constantly on the watch where the children are playing in a house to see what they do. He has that peculiar property or power possessed by the chameleon and a few other creatures, of changing his color to the hue of the spot he is on, so that he is almost invisible unless great care is taken to seek for him. If he were on a blue spot in the carpet, for instance, one would have to lie down flat on the floor and look for him sideways in order to detect that he was there, for he will exactly match the blue shade. If he were upon any other colored stuff, such as a chair-cover or a curtain, then he would be just the same tint as the material, and even on a white bedspread it would be just as difficult to see him.

He also has the habit, so common to water bugs or cockroaches, of hiding behind a chair-leg or other object when anyone is about. The cockroach is considered by naturalists as the very cleverest of insects just because of this peculiarity, as no other beetle has sense enough to hide in that manner, but simply runs away or gets under a stone and hides, while the wise and smart roach slips behind something and waits until you have departed. One may see the tips of their feelers or antennae sticking out and wiggling up and down as if Mr. Bug was nervously wondering when on earth you are going. Then, as soon as your back is turned, out he pops and gets to work again.

The natural color of the Telltale Bug is a deep golden yellow, with crimson spots, nine in number, on his back. If you should happen upon such a beetle in the fields you will know that it is a Telltale Bug who has not yet got into a house where they have children, for he will enter no other.

Whether he grows old and dies when the children have become men and women, or goes away when they are too old to be watched, is a question over which the naturalists have long wrangled bitterly. I think he dies when his work is over, but Professor Thomas, of Princeton College, supposes that he retires to the woods and rears a family of young bugs.

At any rate, nobody has ever seen a Telltale Bug in a house inhabited only by old people or in a vacant dwelling. They are about as large as your thumb when fully grown.

As to the Redhaired Hazarack, or Pincer-bill, nobody ever knew what it was like until its photograph was accidentally taken when it got Oliver Mason, although many persons have pretended to describe it in books, saying that it had horns, wings, eyes like the Podinkus or claws like the Unsquatopus and bellowed like a bull, every bit of which was incorrect, as I shall shortly prove.

A glance at the picture of part of the Hazarack will be of more use than many pages of careful description, but even I do not know how that part of the animal below the floor looks. He may have a tail or flukes like a whale, or even feathers, for all I know, but it is quite unlikely that he resembles most animals whose forepart is built in this manner. So I should imagine that he has perhaps two hairy hind legs and some sort of a funny tail, but I will not state positively.



Not that I particularly desire ever to see him, for in fact that's far from being my wish, although he doesn't get grown-up men. I think that even to look at him would give me a pain, yet in the interest of science I would study him at a safe distance.

Oliver Mason, who lived in a certain house with his sister Pauline, was what almost anybody would consider a bad boy, although he never would admit that he was worse than most boys around here. I will leave it entirely to you to say what he was when you have heard what he did. If you do not think he was pretty bad I'll have no more to say.

He was ten years old when this story begins, but since he was three he was the worst, most mischievous child ever seen in that village, which was a big one and has three hundred people in it. It was called St. Thomas, and was a very nice, quiet place, where the quail often came right into the gardens and whistled "Bob White" all day long.

Oliver was known all over St. Thomas as "the worst ever," which sufficiently explains his character. He was cross-eyed, red-headed, freckled and bow-legged, so after all when the thing got him I don't suppose his folks mourned very much. Not, at least, as much as they would have done had Pauline been taken.

The Mason house was the finest in the place, as his father was the richest man, being the banker and also owning many houses. It was the only house that had a lawn in front, as well as water and gas and an electric doorbell, which furnished much amusement to the children when it was first put in. The house was so large that Oliver had a room all of his own to play in, as had his sister, besides an immense garret that was a whole playground in itself, but with all this he was not content and went from garret to cellar daily trying to find some new vent for his mischief-making desires.



For many years he did the meanest things, and yet with consummate cleverness always managed to put the blame upon the cook or the upstairs girl, or even Pauline, occasionally, so that he was never suspected. This was easier, too, because his father never could fix it so that he could catch Oliver's eye, as he was so cross-eyed it made Mr. Mason dizzy to look at him.

If you can't catch and hold a boy's eye it is almost impossible to tell whether he is lying or not, and this was the reason Oliver always escaped. Cooks and other servants were discharged for the things that he had done, and he chuckled in secret glee as he watched them leave, red-faced and angry at the injustice done them. His father never smote him when some innocent servant girl, who was saving her wages to marry and support some worthy man, was discharged in the middle of a hard winter and was compelled to take a job at fifteen or twenty dollars a month less or else live with her mother and do the family washing for nothing.

Oliver would turn on the water in the bath-tub and go away until it overflowed and spoiled the parlor wall-paper. Once he did catch it for that. His father always read the paper at the breakfast table, and neither of the children were allowed to speak to him or ask questions or otherwise interrupt him until he had finished reading.

Twice Oliver, feeling a slight remorse, for this was when he was very much younger, tried to speak, but his mother whispered to him to wait until he had read his paper. That day the paper happened to have two pages of news, as the village store hadn't sent in its advertisement in time for printing, and it took Mr. Mason some time. When at last he laid his paper down Mrs. Mason said:

"Now, Oliver, you may speak."

"I only wanted to say that when I came downstairs to breakfast," replied Oliver, slowly, "I saw the water running in the bath-tub."

Mr. Mason rose and dashed upstairs, followed by the rest of the family, and found a stream of water flowing over the bath-tub rim an inch deep. Then Oliver had a meeting, a short but



THE PICTURE TAKEN BY PAULINE'S CAMERA.

busy session, with his pa, and he ate his breakfast standing at the table until two days had passed because the seam in his trousers hurt him so. Still the water was occasionally found running, but it was never fastened on him. He did hate a bath-tub, anyway.

From his baby days he invariably played with matches whenever he could get hold of them, and many a time came within an ace of setting the house on fire. When older he built bonfires in the yard secretly, and as the blaze flared up ran out crying "fire" and frightened everybody half to death.

It was always supposed that some vindictive person, envying Mr. Mason his wealth, for he belonged to the Standard Oil Company, had tried to burn his palatial residence, and sometimes he almost determined to leave his native village and buy a house on Riverside Drive, in New York, but the fact that taxes and fire insurance were cheaper in St. Thomas caused him to remain.



Oliver grew up, but only to widen his field of mischief. He found out so many ways of being bad that sometimes I think he was really a wonderful genius, and might perhaps have grown up to be an actor or a novelist had he lived to be a man. He used to wet the kindling wood to annoy the cook, eat jam and then leave marks all over the shelves with a dried mouse's foot which he kept for that purpose, so as to delude his mother into imagining that a mouse had done the damage. He often varied this sport by making holes in sugar bags and other receptacles containing provisions and it was always blamed upon an innocent mouse.

He bored a hole in the kindling wood, put powder in the cavity and plugged it up. When the cook had gotten the fire well started and had seated herself to read "Lady Violet's Curse, or the Twice-Doomed Baronet of Twiddleigh Crimptons-on-the-Hike," a stirring tale that came weekly in the "Grocers' Bulletin," the gunpowder exploded with an awful report, the stove blew up and the kitchen rocked. All the windows were broken, the cook received a shock that sent her to bed for two days, and she was accused of trying to light the fire with kerosene oil.

When the new cook came Oliver was ready for her with new devices. He put salt in the sugar, put vinegar in the milk and soured it and greased the back stairs with tallow the very first morning. Then he placed red pepper on her stove so that she was driven out into the yard and the dinner was completely spoiled. Mr. Mason told his wife to discharge the girl at once. When she went to bed she found a turtle crawling in her room, and as she was from the city she did not know what it was, but thought it was a big bug of some sort, so she yelled for help. Oliver came running up at once and hid the turtle in his blouse while the girl was trying to climb up the wall.

When Oliver's father came she could not find the turtle, so that Mr. Mason was certain that the girl was demented. On the other hand, she was determined not to sleep in any place where the bugs were as big as her hand, and out she went at once. Pauline suspected Oliver of having a hand in this matter, but nobody else did.

The next cook had other trials to endure. Oliver placed a pail of water over the kitchen door which upset upon her when she opened it. When she went into the cellar she stepped into another bucket of water placed at the foot of the stairs. This was blamed upon Gladys Keefe, the previous cook. The new one, Elsie Devere, went almost crazy before she left. Oliver would go into the cellar and blow into the gas burner there, which, as you perhaps know, will put out every light in the whole house as sure as shooting, and then while she was in the dark he would make awful noises below, scaring her into convulsions, for she believed in spooks. His father always blamed this upon the gas company and made complaints very often about it, which tickled Oliver nearly to death.

He put walnut shells on the cat's feet, and when she came clattering along the hall Elsie went into spasms. He stuck a silver of wood into the side of the electric push-button on the front door, so that it rang and rang although no one was there, and she said the house was haunted. When she saw nobody at the door she threw her apron over her head and said things in Latin that he could not understand at all. But he saw that she was frightened and that pleased him. He stole mince-meat by lifting the lids of newly-made pies, and ate it, after which he substituted potato parings, and when his mother cut the pie the night the minister was there to dinner she was so mortified that she blushed to see him try to eat the potato parings. But Oliver only grinned.

The minister was too polite to show that he was not pleased with Mrs. Mason's pies, but he never came there to dinner again, which also pleased Oliver, as he didn't like the man. He soaped the front steps that night, but somehow the minister managed to walk down without an accident, and Oliver was bitterly disappointed, for he dearly wished to see him turn a somersault and find out what a minister says under the circumstances. Elsie left after his next performance, saying that the house was bewitched from top to bottom.



Oliver had dropped a handful of baking powder into the molasses jug a few minutes previous to Elsie's cooking hour, and had been waiting to hear from it. The poor girl needed some molasses to make the children a cake, so she opened the jug on the kitchen table. When she drew the cork, out came a mass of rich froth that boiled up furiously, overflowing upon the table, then upon the floor. It flowed and flowed, surging forth like a volcano, and it seemed never ending. While she stood transfixed at the sight, the jug kept on spouting forth like a geyser until half the kitchen was flooded, and then she ventured to taste the mixture.

That assured her that witches were at work, for she had never tasted such molasses. When she went upstairs to her room,

resolved to leave at once, she had a fit on finding a live mouse in the sleeve of her best Sunday shirt waist, pinned there by Oliver in the morning. Then she left.

This boy exhausted ingenuity as he exhausts my power of describing all of his tricks. He got a piece of aged and decrepit Limburger cheese, which is the noisiest and most fetching cheese as regards perfume in all the world, and he placed it carefully in his mother's work-basket, covering it with spools and other material. There it gave forth an aroma estimated by scientists at about sixty-five horse-power, filling the house with fragrance and penetrating closets and crannies most insidiously. When his mother came home she simply said "dead rats," and began house-cleaning. It was a week before he removed it, and he was never detected, for to this day they think it was a defunct rodent, although his father hinted that it was more like a deceased horse in power and aromatic pungency.

Then, just in time, came the Telltale Bug.

It took up its quarters in the playground, and soon saw that it had long been needed in that house.

It saw him melt the nose of Pauline's best wax doll by laying it close to the gas stove. Then it watched him shoot his air-ride out of the window and break seventeen panes of glass in the neighbors' windows and two in a lamp post, after which it did its duty. It promptly went to Mrs. Mason and told her what it had seen.

Of course, had Mrs. Mason received this information from any but a Telltale Bug she would never have given credence to it, but nobody who is a parent ever doubts one word uttered by one of these useful and necessary insects, let me assure you of that. She wept a little, for she had always imagined Oliver to be a perfect boy in spite of all his pranks, but she believed, of course, what the bug told her. She went to her son and told him that she knew he had broken the windows, but he deliberately made up a lie, saying that the windows were broken by Johnny Meader, "the big, fat rascal," he called him.



Now I do not suppose that there is anything that will stir up a Telltale Bug like a lie, for that puts the burden upon the insect and makes it seem that he is a falsifier, although, of course, all parents know very well that such a thing is impossible.

This particular bug was no exception to the rule, and he was very angry at Oliver. And Oliver's mother knew that John Meader was far too fat to be going about breaking windows, but she said no more. She now knew that her boy, besides being cross-eyed and red-headed and bow-legged, was imperfect in other ways, and even then, I think, she began to get ready for the end, although she never suspected that the Hazarack would get him.

For a few days, warned by the fact that at last he was un-

masked and known in his true light by his mother at last, Oliver was very careful about playing any pranks, but when a week had passed without any diversion he fell.

He began by buying ten cents' worth of St. Thomas whisky,

which is very powerful indeed, and soaking corn in it for twenty-four hours, after which he fed it to Mr. Deatrich's chickens. They became awfully drunk and staggered about the streets until some kind ladies led them carefully home to Mr. Deatrich.

Oliver nearly laughed himself sick, but as for the chickens,

they all refused to look at corn for many a day, which shows that

poultry have far more sense than many men. This was so suc-

cessful a trick that the boy forgot all about his mother's words

of warning, and looked about for another opening for his mis-

chief-making propensities. He did not look far before he

thought of something.



Mr. Mason was very fond of a huge rocking chair which had belonged to his mother, who was a Stuyvesant or a Van Rensselaer or something very aristocratic like that, and every night he sat and read the stock reports in that chair, sometimes falling asleep in it, too. Oliver carefully sawed the rear legs until but a mere splinter of wood remained, and even put putty in the crack to hide the evidence of his wicked work. Then he just waited, looking very demure, but something told him that he had gone too far. Still, he felt no real remorse, for if he had he would have confessed before his father came home. Instead he went to William Harvey and told him of what he had done. William was delighted, and promised to be around to see how the trick worked, but alas for William he was never seen again.

Inside of an hour he disappeared forever while he was playing in his cellar all alone. Nobody knows what happened, but in the light of later events it is pretty certain that the Hazarack got him before he came after Oliver, for he was nearly as bad a boy, although not nearly so homey. His cup was found beside a barrel in which he had placed a couple of pecks of firecrackers, intending, no doubt, to set them off and frighten his old aunt, with whom he lived. No other vestige of William Harvey was ever seen, and for many a day children mentioned his name with bated breath in St. Thomas, and, in fact, all over the country.

It was almost dark when William disappeared. Oliver was eating his dinner when he heard a faint cry that sounded somewhat like his friend's voice, but he merely thought that the boy's aunt had caught him and was punishing him. Oliver was taken himself before he ever learned what had occurred, but now perhaps he knows even more than we do about it, as we can not tell what the Hazarack does with the bad boys it takes away. It may keep them alive somewhere and make them continually play tricks upon one another, which I consider would be a sufficient punishment, or it may simply fatten them up and then devour them as dragons are said to devour the lovely maidens in the fairy stories. Until we learn more about this mysterious animal we can not say much concerning its habits or tastes.

Well, Oliver's plan succeeded, and when his father scented himself in the old rocker both of the legs broke at once and he was thrown over backward with great force. His head narrowly missed striking the porch railing, but as it was he experienced a

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dreadful shock and was awfully strained, so that he sent for Doctor Kempner and then went to bed.

Did Oliver feel any pangs of sorrow at what he had done? Not a pang! He chuckled in the dark hall while his father said things that could not be repeated in public, and yet he felt a shiver of fear for the coming of the daylight, when his injured and irate parent should discover the marks of the saw on his beloved piece of furniture.

That was all, merely a slight fear, but when his mother came with such a sad face and led him to his bedroom he began to wonder. She told him that she understood all. She proved very conclusively that she knew he had sawed the rocker's legs, although the wicked and incorrigible lad attempted to deny it. When at last he asked her how she knew, she told him about the Telltale Bug and his eyes bulged out with amazement, for he had never heard of that splendid golden-hued insect.

Oliver gritted his teeth while his mother spoke, resolving to find that bug and smash it immediately, but he little knew how nearly impossible was that task. His mother left him after a time, and she was weeping, but he did not weep one little tear, for he was mad clear through. He went around searching for bugs and found some water-bugs, to be sure, but nothing that seemed to be as intelligent as the one his mother had told him about.

Little did he know that the Telltale Bug was right beside him all the time, watching every movement. But there it was skipping about briskly, almost under his feet, changing color all the time as it ran along from one tint to another on the carpet, now pink, now blue or brown or, the woodwork or floor, or pale green on the wall-paper. It knew very well what he was searching for, but it was not the least bit troubled. He went into the kitchen and got the cockroach-trap, a device that catches even those exceedingly clever beetles, and placed it by a small hole in the wall. Finally he got a bottle of insect-powder and liberally sprinkled the floor and even the bed with it, filling the room with the pungent dust until he almost sneezed his head off. But the Telltale Bug is perhaps the only insect which is never bothered or even disturbed by insect-powder, and it laughed, for the cloud of yellow dust permitted it to assume its natural golden color, and that it most desired at all times.



There was one hole in the carpet made by Oliver with his air-rifle, and right beneath it was a knot-hole in the floor used perhaps by an occasional mouse, and this hole seemed particularly likely to be the abode of the dreaded bug. Oliver poured much insect-powder into it, emptying the bottle there, in fact, but he was not satisfied, and when he went to bed he thought over plans to destroy the insect until far in the night. When at last he fell asleep he dreamed an awful dream. It was this:

He seemed to be in a great hall surrounded by boys who were all busy studying or carving wood or drawing, and he was on a platform doing some work that was being used as a model for all of them. He heard a teacher say that Oliver Mason was the best workman and the most careful student in the hall, and instead of feeling glad he was even in his dream, shaken with rage and regret. Then came another teacher and presented him with a gold book as a prize after making a long speech praising his deportment and manners in school.

Then his hair was cut and all the little short hairs fell down his neck, as you know how they do, and turned to burning wires that wriggled all the way down to his heels. His finger-nails were cleaned by a manicure, and he had to sit still while it was being done, seemingly held as by a vice, after which he was placed in a great bath-tub of silver and scrubbed and scrubbed until it seemed as if his very skin was coming off. In a little while a cold spray of water was turned on him that chilled his blood.

All this time he was praised and commended by a crowd of other children whose very faces he hated. He wished for a handful of stones to throw at them. After all he was dressed in white velvet and he had to walk seven miles, while all the others rode in carriages, to another vast hall, where he was made to eat oatmeal and coffee without sugar, cream or milk.

All the rest ate hot crullers, pie, pickles, ice cream and cinnamon buns. And the worst of it was that he was utterly unable to say one word, but had to smile and seem pleased all the time.

Oh, it was a terrible nightmare! When he awoke he shuddered and then he thought of the Telltale Bug. He sprang out of bed and went to the kitchen, for a plan had come to him. He seized a tea-kettle from the pantry shelf and filled it with steaming hot water, and ran upstairs as fast as he could. He hastily poured the water into the hole in the floor, without considering the damage it might do to the ceiling below and he grinned, saying:

"There! That'll knock out that old Telltale Bug, I'll bet an apple!"

As he spoke the floor seemed to rock like a sea, and he could see that something was moving beneath the boards, but he thought that it was the dying throes of the bug and laughed. The next morning the boards cracked with a noise like thunder, the carpet ripped open for two yards and three or four boards rose up into the room smashed into toothpicks.

He saw something beneath, but a glance showed that it was no mere bug. It was something huge and hairy, red as a fox and bristling with rage, and its fiery eyes glared like a lion's. Two immense pincers formed a huge beak that pushed up through the floor as if of steel, snapping like some enormous piece of machinery.

Finally out darted with incredible swiftness five long snaky tentacles that were like those of the giant octopus or cuttle-fish of the Pacific, but red and shining, which grappled the bad boy by the legs and held him vicelike.

Oliver tried to call to his mother, but his voice was gone and a feeble squeak was all that he could utter. Nor could he struggle, for now the awful tentacles had hold of his arms. The gigantic beak of pincers at last grabbed him by the middle, and in a twinkling he was dragged down into the hole and he vanished.

Something told Oliver's mother in her sleep, perhaps it was the Telltale Bug, that all was not well with her boy, and Pauline, too, was waked suddenly, but Mr. Mason snored on. Mrs. Mason hastened to his room only to be amazed and frightened by the great cavity in the floor. There was absolutely nothing to tell her what had happened or where her son had gone, and when at last the sorrowful bug had gently broken the sad news to her she refused to believe him.



But on the table stood Pauline's camera, which Oliver had sneakily stolen away because it was all ready to take a picture and he wished to annoy her by using all her plates. On the shutter that snaps and takes the picture the Telltale Bug had stood all the time Oliver was struggling in the grasp of the Hazarack.

In his excitement the bug had jumped up and snapped the shutter once. A picture was then taken, and when a few days later Pauline developed some plates, she found a photograph showing her brother in the grip of the animal.

Only then was it certain what had happened to the missing boy. As nothing more was ever heard of Oliver Mason there is no more to tell. Neither was the Telltale Bug ever seen again by Oliver's mother, as Pauline was a good child and furnished no opportunity for the insect.

So that's all.

WALT McDOUGALL